

Our Last Occupation



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Gas, Chemicals, Bombs: Britain Has Used Them All before in Iraq

NO ONE, LEAST OF ALL THE BRITISH, SHOULD BE SURPRISED AT THE STATE OF ANARCHY IN IRAQ. We have been here before. We know the territory, its long and miasmatic history, the all-but-impossible diplomatic balance to be struck between the cultures and ambitions of Arabs, Kurds, Shia and Sunni, of Assyrians, Turks, Americans, French, Russians and of our own desire to keep an economic and strategic presence there.

Laid waste, a chaotic post-invasion Iraq may now well be policed by old and new imperial masters promising liberty, democracy and unwanted exiled leaders, in return for oil, trade and submission. Only the last of these promises is certain. The peoples of Iraq, even those who have cheered passing troops, have every reason to mistrust foreign invaders. They have been lied to far too often, bombed and slaughtered promiscuously.

Iraq is the product of a lying empire. The British carved it duplicitously from ancient history, thwarted Arab hopes, Ottoman loss, the dunes of Mesopotamia and the mountains of Kurdistan at the end of the first world war. Unsurprisingly, anarchy and insurrection were there from the start.

The British responded with gas attacks by the army in the south, bombing by the fledgling RAF in both north and south. When Iraqi tribes stood up for themselves, we unleashed the flying dogs of war to "police" them. Terror bombing, night bombing, heavy bombers, delayed action bombs (particularly lethal against children) were all developed during raids on mud, stone and reed villages during Britain's League of Nations' mandate.

The mandate ended in 1932; the semi-colonial monarchy in 1958. But during the period of direct British rule, Iraq proved a useful testing ground for newly forged weapons of both limited and mass destruction, as well as new techniques for controlling imperial outposts and vassal states.

The RAF was first ordered to Iraq to quell Arab and Kurdish and Arab uprisings, to protect recently discovered oil reserves, to guard Jewish settlers in Palestine and to keep Turkey at bay. Some mission, yet it had already proved itself an effective imperial police force in both Afghanistan and Somaliland (today's Somalia) in 1919-20. British and US forces have been back regularly to bomb these hubs of recalcitrance ever since.

Winston Churchill, secretary of state for war and air, estimated that without the RAF, somewhere between 25,000 British and 80,000 Indian troops would be needed to control Iraq. Reliance on the airforce promised to cut these numbers to just 4,000 and 10,000. Churchill's confidence was soon repaid.

An uprising of more than 100,000 armed tribesmen against the British occupation swept through Iraq in the summer of 1920. In went the RAF. It flew missions totalling 4,008 hours, dropped 97 tons of bombs and fired 183,861 rounds for the loss of nine men killed, seven wounded and 11 aircraft destroyed behind rebel lines. The rebellion was thwarted, with nearly 9,000 Iraqis killed. Even so, concern was expressed in Westminster: the operation had cost more than the entire British-funded Arab rising against the Ottoman Empire in 1917-18.

The RAF was vindicated as British military expenditure in Iraq fell from \$123 million in 1921 to less than \$14 million five years later. This was despite the fact that the number of bombing raids increased after 1923 when Squadron Leader Arthur Harris - the future hammer of Hamburg and Dresden, whose statue stands in Fleet Street in London today - took command of 45 Squadron. Adding bomb-racks to Vickers Vernon troop carriers, Harris more or less invented the heavy bomber as well as night "terror" raids. Harris did not use gas himself - though the RAF had employed mustard gas against Bolshevik troops in 1919, while the army had gassed Iraqi rebels in 1920 "with excellent moral effect".

Churchill was particularly keen on chemical weapons, suggesting they be used "against recalcitrant Arabs as an experiment". He dismissed objections as "unreasonable". "I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes – [to] spread a lively terror —"In today's terms, "the Arab" needed to be shocked and awed. A good gassing might well do the job. Conventional raids, however, proved to be an effective deterrent.

They brought Sheikh Mahmoud, the most persistent of Kurdish rebels, to heel, at little cost. Writing in 1921, Wing Commander J A Chamier suggested that the best way to demoralise local people was to concentrate bombing on the "most inaccessible village of the most prominent tribe which it is desired to punish. All available aircraft must be collected the attack with bombs and machine guns must be relentless and unremitting and carried on continuously by day and night, on houses, inhabitants, crops and cattle."

"The Arab and Kurd now know", reported Squadron Leader Harris after several such raids, "what real bombing means within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out, and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured, by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape."

In his memoir of the crushing of the 1920 Iraqi uprising, Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer L Haldane, quotes his own orders for the punishment of any Iraqi found in possession of weapons "with the utmost severity": "The village where he resides will be destroyed pressure will be brought on the inhabitants by cutting off water power the area being cleared of the necessaries of life". He added the warning: "Burning a village properly takes a long time, an hour or more according to size".

Punitive British bombing continued throughout the 1920's. An eyewitness account by Saleh 'Umar al Jabrim describes a raid in February 1923 on a village in southern Iraq, where Bedouin were celebrating 12 weddings. After a visit from the RAF, a woman, two boys, a girl and four camels were left dead. There were many wounded. Perhaps to please his British interrogators, Saleh declared: "These casualties are from God and no one

is to be blamed." One RAF officer, Air Commodore Lionel Charlton, resigned in 1924 when he visited a hospital after such a raid and faced armless and legless civilian victims. Others held less generous views of those under their control.

"Woe betide any native [working for the RAF] who was caught in the act of thieving any article of clothing that may be hanging out to dry", wrote Aircraftsman 2nd class, H Howe, based at RAF Hunaidi, Baghdad. "It was the practice to take the offending native into the squadron gymnasium. Here he would be placed in the boxing ring, used as a punch bag by members of the boxing team, and after he had received severe punishment, and was in a very sorry condition, he would be expelled for good, minus his job."

At the time of the Arab revolt in Palestine in the late 1930's, Air Commodore Harris, as he then was, declared that "the only thing the Arab understands is the heavy hand, and sooner or later it will have to be applied". As in 1921, so in 2003.



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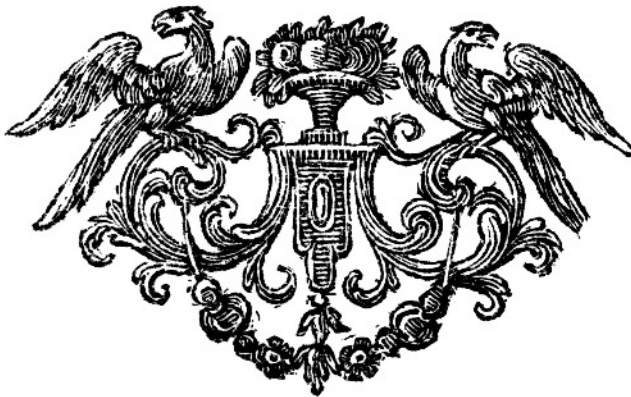
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